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ABSTRACT

The teaching profession's present notion of the ability of teachers to contribute to theory development in language education needs reexamination. University researchers can best foster this ability by encouraging and assisting teachers to become engaged in classroom research. On the basis of both published evidence and field data, it can be argued that (1) teachers inescapably function as theorists, (2) their potential contributions to theory are vital to the growth of the profession, and (3) their work as theory builders is enhanced by engaging in the process of research. Current literature as well as examples from field work with researchers who teach in public school classrooms show that research enhances theory building by helping teachers focus observations, sharpen research skill, and develop collegial relationships with other researchers and theorists. Finally, many current notions of teacher research are too limited to be useful in theory building. The vital contributions of teachers to language learning theory will come through their involvement in what James Britton called "basic research." Inviting teachers, who live daily with the complex realities of language growth through language use, to be full partners in the enterprise of research and theory development is the "best help" for teachers, and the teaching profession as well. Teacher researchers can provide theoretical enrichment as thoughtful professionals constantly in touch with crucial data. (Fifty references are attached.) (RAE)

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Beyond Teacher Research: The Teacher as Theory Builder

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we propose that the profession's present notion of the ability of teachers to contribute to theory development in language education needs reexamination, and that university researchers can best foster this ability by encouraging and assisting teachers to become engaged in classroom research. On the basis of both published evidence and our own field data, we argue that 1) teachers inescapably function as theorists, 2) their potential contributions to theory are vital to the growth of the profession, and 3) their work as theory builders is enhanced by engaging in the process of research. Current literature as well as examples from our own field work with researchers who teach in public school classrooms are cited to show that research enhances theory building by helping teachers focus observations, sharpen research skill, and develop collegial relationships with other researchers and theorists. Finally, we propose that many current notions of teacher research are too limited to be useful in theory building, and suggest that the vital contributions of teachers to language learning theory will come through their involvement in what James Britton called "basic research".

Beyond Teacher Research: The Teacher as Theory Builder

Researchers like Margaret Donaldson (1978) and Harste, Woodward, & Burke (1984) have recently given ample cause for soul searching. Offering authentic data that simply could not be ignored, they have challenged accepted views of children, of literacy, even of adults and professionals. These challenges have led many in the profession to do some personal theory building in the midst of their other ongoing work. In the pages of Children's Minds and Language Stories and Literacy Lessons, scholars saw children doing the unexpected, things research said children couldn't do, and existing theories had to be accomodated to what they saw.

Every day, teachers see children do the unexpected. Those daily surprises become challenges for good teachers. Unwilling to ignore what they've seen, they do some soul searching, and try to make sense

of things. In the midst of their work as teachers they must, and they do, engage in the process of theory building (Lee, 1987).

This theory building process among classroom teachers is often invisible. Indeed, some researchers assert that theory plays no real part in the actions and decisions of teachers (Duffy, 1981, 1982; Duffy & McIntyre, 1980), perhaps because there is nothing in teachers' behavior that looks or sounds like theory or theory-building as the researchers know it. Besides, teachers themselves often assert that they follow no particular theory (Harste & Burke, 1977), but simply do things which work for them or which fit their style.

But if researchers have not seen classroom teachers as theory builders, then it is time they followed Ann Berthoff's (1981) advice to look again at their data and at the things they know. After working with teachers as they conducted their own studies in their own classrooms, and examining our data in light of similar work reported in the literature, we have come to believe that the profession's understanding of theory at work in the minds and moves of teachers is remarkably similar to what its understanding of young children's literacy was until recently. Not so long ago, young children's scribblings were dismissed as cute, but unworthy of serious attention as literacy events. Children's functional, invented spellings (Read, 1975) were simply incorrect, and no one had bothered to notice that these spellings result from precisely the same strategies adults use (Bouffler, 1983). Researchers spoke of "reading-like" behavior (Holdaway, 1979) as if it were something other than reading itself, perfectly content to confuse convention with literacy (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), and to deny young readers, benignly but

effectively, the respect and attention they deserved. Although the profession is far from unanimous about what to make of recent findings in this regard, it has been willing at least to entertain the proposition that young children know and can do far more than we ever thought. We suggest that it is now time for the profession to entertain a similar idea about teachers: that they are engaged in real theory-building, just as authentically as young children are engaged in real literacy events, long before the products of their efforts are conventional, or explicit and formal.

Lee (1987) has shown that although the theories of teachers are sometimes implicit rather than explicit, they can, upon reflection, articulate their theories. Perhaps more importantly, Lee argued that teachers' theories do not arise from the deliberate process of theory construction familiar to researchers, but are often built within the instructional context as the result of transactions (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985) among teachers, their students, texts, researchers, administrators, parents, and personal experiences. Thus, a teacher's theory is sometimes implicit and usually personal and informal, in contrast to the explicit, public, formal theory of scholarly texts and research journals. While researchers therefore may not view teachers' theories as conventional, they have the same characteristics and functions as conventional theories. Theories serve to explain phenomena and guide action, and a number of researchers have shown that K-12 teachers operate on a theoretical basis in the classroom (Clark & Elmore, 1981; Clark & Yinger, 1977, 1979; DeFord, 1979, 1985; Harste & Burke, 1977; Kinzer & Carrick, 1986; Koech, 1983; Mitchell, 1980; Shake, 1984). Theories also generate questions

for further study; in this regard, they provide for their own expansion and refinement.

If teachers have theories, those theories must develop as the questions they provide are explored. Corey (1952, 1953), who is credited with coining the term action research (Lehmann & Mehrens, 1971, p. 6), showed that teachers' daily planning and decision-making involved informal research processes, including the development and testing of hypotheses, and that these informal processes differed from those employed in published research only in "the degree of care exercised and the degree of confidence that can be placed in results" (1953, p. 72). Indeed, Lee (1987) found among many of the teachers she interviewed theories that were considerably developed as a result of the informal research that arises from the everyday work of teaching.

Our profession needs these theories from the classroom. Many researchers recognize the need for classroom-based research (Green & Bloome, 1983) in order to develop practical theory (Harste, 1985: Stenhouse, 1985) based on language in use (Halliday & Hasan, 1980; Herzfeld, 1983). Researchers must now recognize the unique contributions that teachers can make to the development of such theory. They are in classrooms, the ideal laboratories for educational theory development (Stenhouse, 1981), on a daily basis. They know their classrooms and their students in ways an outsider cannot (Goswami, 1984). In addition, they already possess personal theories of the very sort needed - theories rooted in experience with students in a vast assortment of communicative contexts. Finally, by exploring and articulating their theories, teachers can make them more inclusive, more explicit, and more powerful. As they do so, they deserve both our

respect and our support.

Classroom Research and Theory Building

A key question, then, for university researchers is "How can we support these teachers?" Our best answer for the moment is to encourage teachers who want to conduct research (Patterson & Stansell, 1987), respect their right to ownership of their research (Boomer, 1985), and offer help according to their need for it. Although we have asserted that all teachers are theorists because of the nature of their instructional role, we argue, with Calkins (1985) and Goswami (1984) that engagement in the research process can enhance a teacher's theory building. As teachers do research, their theories become more explicit, more systematic, and more useful to other educators.

The researcher role facilitates teachers' theorizing in at least three general ways. First, they begin focusing on different issues in their classrooms, issues more closely related to learning than to classroom management and more closely related to process than to product (Atwell, 1982; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Mohr & Maclean, 1987; McConaghy, 1986; Ray, 1987). Second, they learn strategies which can enhance both instruction and research (Mohr, 1985; Mohr & Maclean, 1987; Stenhouse, 1975); their enhanced research can build enhanced theories. Third, they meet new colleagues as they begin to share their work with audiences beyond the teachers' lounge (Atwell, 1982; Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Mohr, 1987), assuring that their personal theory-building enriches and is enriched by the perspectives of other researchers.

Doing Research Helps Focus on the Learning Process

Betty Higgins, a junior high teacher who has just completed her

third research project, confirms that the researcher's role prompts teachers to change their thinking about instructional decisions by encouraging them to look at their students differently, to ask different kinds of questions:

> Before, I was just looking for (students') answers: Did they respond to what I asked them to do? After I started working on this research, I looked at their work, whether it was oral or written, as more information about that student. It wasn't just a grade to be recorded and handed back, but, "What does this tell me about what they're learning?"

Higgins also talks about how, as a researcher in a junior high classroom, she can't focus only on her original research question. Other things happen in the classroom which may affect whatever she is watching. She says that when teachers begin to study their students, as researchers, they become more conscious of all that goes on. Although good teachers are always aware of superfluous activity, Higgins asserts that to a researcher those distractions take on other meanings: "You start questioning everything about how it affects the learning process." That statement surely exemplifies theory development in action. It also echoes the observations of Clay (1982) and Goswami (1984) that teachers who do research become theorists who question and test their assumptions, and Mohr's (1987) experience with teachers who found even irritating behavior interesting in their research.

Doing research affects the teacher's instructional focus in another powerful way: it encourages teachers to test published

research findings against their own theoretical understandings. Rather than looking at published research as separated from the real world of classroom practice, teachers who do research can identify with fellow researchers and feel more apt to consider published findings in relation to their own data and their own theoretical statements (Atwell, 1982; Goswami, 1984). Paulette Welch, a junior high reading teacher, became aware of prediction strategies and semantic mapping at professional conferences. She conducted her own classroom research project to explore the effects of using semantic maps as prediction strategies before her students read their assigned stories. Not content to apply published findings directly and uncritically, she wanted to see how they would work in her own particular classroom. Becoming a researcher gave Welch a systematic way to watch her students' responses to this strategy so that she could have more than just "a feeling" about whether and how it worked.

Doing Research Develops Research Strategies

A second way in which research enhances teachers' theory building is that it requires teachers to sharpen their research skills (Atwell, 1982, 1986; Myers, 1985; Stenhouse, 1975). For example, teachers must become skillful observers. Their research questions provide for purposeful observation, serving much the same function that pre-reading activities serve for student readers. When teachers decide beforehand what they are looking for, observations are likely to be more coherent and more detailed. In addition, observation of the learning process may affect subsequent interpretations of students' finished work (Allen, Combs, Hendricks, Nash, & Wilson, 1988). The teacher who is a researcher recognizes that it is critical to watch students while they

are learning (Atwell, 1982); such observational expertise is generally not developed in pre-service teacher education experiences, nor is there much guidance or extrinsic incentive to develop it after a teacher enters the classroom. Engaging in classroom research offers teachers a reason to observe carefully, as well as opportunities to develop and refine their observational skill.

In addition, classroom observations must be documented systematically for research purposes. The research process encourages teachers to do things like chart student responses, write field notes, collect writing samples, and tape conferences for later reference (Allen, Combs, Hendricks, Nash, & Wilson, 1988). Those procedures are accessible to teachers whether they are involved in research or not, and although they can document individual student progress much more powerfully than any standardized test, very few teachers see the power of that documentation. Because documentation takes time and can be tedious, teachers who are not involved in research are apt to question whether the procedures are worth the considerable time and effort required. Those who do research have the opportunity to try those procedures and be convinced of their value.

Another tool which research offers to teachers is the writing process. As researchers, teachers discover that writing about their observations helps them see relationships which hadn't been apparent before (Burton, 1986). They begin to use writing to think about teaching and learning (Mohr & Maclean, 1987). Without research to encourage teachers to take time to write about their observations, few discover the powerful insights which come from writing about a significant topic. Without written reports of the research teachers

do, the profession as a whole loses theoretically vital insights that emerge from observations of the complexities of authentic classroom language use. An additional advantage for language arts teachers is that full-fledged participation in the writing process which comes with the production of field notes and research reports can enhance their understanding of themselves as writers and help them find connections between their own writing and how they teach writing (Goswami, 1984).

Theory builders, whether they are university professors or third grade teachers, must begin with appropriate and credible inquiry procedures. Doing classroom research gives teachers the opportunity and the incentive to improve their data-gathering and analysis so that theoretical statements can be based on trustworthy findings.

Doing Research Links Teachers to Colleagues

A final way that research can help the teacher as theorist is that it can offer opportunities to transact with colleagues beyond the teacher's lounge, in critical communities of other teachers (Stenhouse, 1981), in professional meetings, and through professional publications (Allen, Combs, Hendricks, Nash, & Wilson, 1988). Two teachers with whom we have worked this year have made presentations which were very well received by both public school and university colleagues. Both of them have written their research reports into articles which they are submitting for publication. That kind of professional sharing among researchers has always been considered both a vital part of theory building, and an important step toward becoming an acknowledged theorist. It is just as important for the development of more powerful theories that teachers can help to build, and for the growth of the teacher as a researcher and theory builder.

It is vital that teachers share the findings and conclusions of their research. Sharing with peers encourages all theory developers to be as thorough and rigorous as possible when they make theoretical statements. It also pushes us beyond the immediacy and the intimacy of our own research settings to generalize about language and about learning - the essential act of theory building. Finally, it is important to remember that professional sharing is a two-way process. Question/answer sessions at conferences and informal discussions over dinner can lead to further correspondence and collaboration. Those kinds of transactions among theorists who operate in different settings can help build our collective theoretical understandings.

Besides their contributions to our profession's collective theory, those opportunities for teachers to share their insights with colleagues can increase their professional self-esteem (Goswami, 1984). A sense of empowerment, of professional worth, comes with presenting and publishing. Only occasionally do classroom teachers feel like colleagues; more often they feel like employees or public servants. Presenting their findings in journals and research conferences helps classroom teachers assume their role as colleagues with one another and with researchers in universities, rather than allowing them to continue feeling like victims of administrative policy and of external curriculum developers. This reason alone justifies the movement of teachers into research, but it also underscores the power of this movement for the teacher as theory builder. Sharing the results of their research can help classroom teachers believe in themselves and in the significance of their scholarly contributions. That sense of professional worth is critical in helping teachers articulate their

findings and their conclusions persuasively, so that they can convey the sense of authenticity and authority associated with respected researchers and theorists.

But while we do advocate research by teachers as a vehicle to enhance their theory building, we also maintain that not all such research is of equal value to theory. In fact, some work that we read and hear about seems almost deliberately atheoretical, both in its intentions and its outcomes. These studies often involve field testing a teaching idea (Calkins, 1985), or finding an answer to some other narrowly-defined pedagogical problem or need. The actual process of seeking the answer often does not include reviewing the literature, and no attempt is made to produce findings that might be applicable beyond the classroom from which they came.

Although we do not doubt the genuine benefits of these inquiries, we do find it unfortunate that so many individuals think only of this kind of study when they hear or use the term teacher research. Like Calkins (1982), we question the assumption, on the part of those who invite teachers to do research without reviewing the literature, that teachers are incapable of dealing with published research and theory. With Atwell (1986), we take exception to the idea that teachers are incapable of being rigorous and theoretical in their research. We agree with both Calkins and Atwell that to conceive of teacher research in this limited way is to patronize teachers. We are as convinced by our experiences as Calkins and Atwell and James Britton (1983) were by theirs that teachers can do more. Many teachers can do what Britton calls basic research, which leads deliberately to findings that are broadly applicable and thus readily presented as theoretical

statements. They can move beyond narrow conceptions of teacher research to join colleagues in other schools and universities in building and refining theories of language and learning in authentic classroom contexts. Indeed, many teachers have already done so.

We contend, then, that our best help for teachers as theory builders is an invitation to basic research. In the end, we think that inviting teachers, who live daily with the complex realities of language growth through language use, to be full partners in the enterprise of research and theory development is our "best help" for the profession as well. To withhold the invitation is to ignore the theoretical enrichment that teacher researchers, thoughtful professionals constantly in touch with crucial data, can provide.

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